DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 258 CS 213 316

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TITLE Transforming the Writing Center with Computers.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - General (050) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Computer Networks; Computer Oriented Programs; *Cooperative Learning; Educational Trends; Higher Education; Technological Advancement; Writing Instruction; *Writing Laboratories
IDENTIFIERS *Computer Assisted Writing; Texas A and M University

ABSTRACT

In the past decade, theories of the social construction of knowledge have resulted in the widespread use of collaborative learning techniques. Computer technology has been in the forefront of this movement, with one result being a minor revolution in writing instruction. Specifically, communications and text sharing through both local and wide area networks has promoted collaborative learning and writing. Through networking for communication, educators can potentially alter the way writing centers are conceived. Despite the great variety of computers in writing centers, their use remains for the most part limited to keeping the student and the machine working in isolation from others. However, research indicates that writing centers as traditionally conceived cannot lay claim to the label "collaborative," but that in fact collaboration promotes the kind of critical literacy that students of the next century will need. The potential of collaboration as a primary mode of learning in writing centers and the potential of communications software to enhance collaboration can be brought together to transform writing centers. Nothing is more suitable as a supplement to face-to-face meeting with tutors than electronic mail, real-time conferencing and text sharing. By using such capabilities, members of writing groups can read and comment upon each other's work throughout the week. Finally, the Texas A&M English Department Writing Center is attempting at this time to implement a program based fully on the model described here. (HB)

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Transforming the Writing Center with Computers

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The past decade has brought a minor revolution to writing instruction in the classroom setting. Theories of the social construction of knowledge have resulted in the widespread use of collaborative learning techiques, and computer technology has been in the forefront of this movement. Specifically, communications and text sharing through both local and wide area networks, has enhanced and promoted collaborative learning and writing (Bump 1990). However, these advances have not yet been adopted by writing centers, at least not on a large scale. In this essay I will explore how networking for communication can potentially alter the way writing centers are presently conceived. Whether the changes are for good or for ill, whether writing centers become mere support centers for computerized writing classes or word processing labs with a few bulletin boards and electronic mail hotlines for frills, will depend in large measure on writing center professionals, on how we define ourselves and our centers. It will also depend on how we employ the computers already available to many of us.

Over the past year I have worked at trying to integrate computers into the Texas A&M University English Department Writing Center. To my dismay, I have discovered that the traditional drop-in center is not condusive to the use of communications software. By communications software I mean any software that uses a network--wide area or local--to allow students to view someone else's text, usually a draft-in-progress (text sharing) or to communicate either by leaving mail or by participating in a real-time conference. For example, DIScourse (Daedalus), which we use at Texas A&M, provides programs for all three functions (NetManager for text-sharing, Contact for electronic mail, and Interchange for real-time conferencing). In our center, we have begun to integrate what Evelyn Posey (1989) calls "single-purpose aids," most notably invention heuristics (Mindwriter by Daedalus) and guided composing, in which a tutor directs a student in invention, drafting, or revising. We have also used electronic mail to create a staff bulletin board that enhances

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center administration and promotes greater communication among tutors. But our uses of communications software is limited either to staff use or to support for specific classes. In the latter instance we become a physical extension of the classroom, allowing classes to meet in small groups in our center and sometimes providing a tutor to help the classroom instructor run a conference.

Nor is my experience unique. I have searched the literature and conducted informal surveys among writing center colleagues and have found that, in spite of great variety both in the the types and numbers of computers in writing centers, their use, while generally far more sophisticated than early drills and computerized worksheets, remains for the most part limited to keeping the student and the machine working in relative isolation from others. Sometimes a tutor acts as coach or mediator between student and computer. But in general, the use of drills (nowadays often in the form of hypertext), of single-purpose aids like word processors, on-line handbooks, style checkers, or invention heuristics, or of "entire-process aids" (Posey 1989) like Writers Helper II, exceeds the use of communications software for conferencing or text-sharing. Because communications software is uniquely suited to collaborative learning and writing, its absence in a writing center--where we often claim to nurture collaboration--is particularly troublesome.

In short, what I have found bears out the claims made by Andrea Lunsford in the lead article of the Fall 1991 Writing Center Journal. Lunsford reminds us that writing centers as traditionally conceived cannot legitimately lay claim to the label "collaborative." Yet she has discovered in her research with Lisa Ede that collaboration promotes the kind of critical literacy students of the 21st century will need (8; Heath). She therefore calls upon us to create, with caution, writing centers that foster true collaboration:

> Such as center would place control, power, and authority not in the tutor or staff, not in the individual student, but in the negotiating group. It would engage students not only in solving problems set by teachers but in identifying problems for themselves; not only in working as a group but in monitoring, evaluating, and

> building a theory of how groups work; not only in understanding and valuing collaboration but in confronting squarely the issues of control that successful collaboration inevitably raises; not only in reaching consensus but in valuing dissensus and diversity. (8-9)

But how is such a "negotiating group" to function in the traditional drop-in writing center? When the authority is invested in a tutor, even though that tutor is once removed from the authority of the instructor, even though that tutor is trained to transfer responsibility for learning to the student, the pedagogy can at best be described as an apprenticeship. Certainly it is not the kind of collaboration that Lunsford and Ede have found so powerful a force for learning. Yet Lunsford does not specify how a truly collaborative center might work.

The potential of collaboration as a primary mode of learning in writing centers and the potential of communications software to enhance collaboration can be brought together to transform writing centers. The collaborative projects that could be carried out by the aid of communications software would use the writing center as a site for research as well as a site for learning. It has been demonstrated in the classroom that communications software can work to promote collaboration (Bump). We have seen it can shift authority to students. But we have also seen that classroom hierarchies cause resistance to true collaboration, both on the parts of teachers and students (Balester, Halasek, and Peterson). Writing centers, on the other hand, are more "subversive," as Lunsford puts it (9). We already hold the ideal of a student-centered environment, and we are at least one remove from the symbol of academic power, the grade. Many of us are uniquely positioned in respect to computer technology as well. As at Texas A&M, we have the computers, we even have the software; yet, we are not using them because we are tied to an old idea of a writing center as a place where one tutor and one student confer over a particular draft or assignment.

Cynthia Selfe challenges English departments to define our goals and objectives before we decide how to use our computers (65). If we define our centers as sites for true collaboration, how will we define the role of the center administrators and the tutors? If tutors and students are not sitting down one-to-one anymore, what will they be doing? And how will they use computers? I will answer these questions by doing an exercise in imagination.

The administrator of this imagined writing center wants not only to provide a service but to research the writing process and writing pedagogy. She or he has thus selected tutors who are willing to meet four objectives (objectives which the director also wants to meet):

(1) To learn about composition theory and practice by reading and discussion, as in a seminar;

(2) To practice teacher-research methods, in particular keeping and sharing detailed logs of tutoring (Nelson);

(3) To help center clients become better writers--with an emphasis on the writer and not the product of writing; and

(4) To work at becoming better writers themselves, mostly by writing.

The center adminstrators--director and assistant directors--are engaged in tutoring and training, not just as spectators or leaders but also as participants. Likewise, tutors help with administration and training. In short, every effort is made to share all adminstrative, tutoring, and training tasks.

In this center, tutors, including the administrator, "need one another to carry out common goals," (6), a condition Lunsford stipulates is necessary for successful collaboration. She adds that it is necessary for "goals [to be] clearly defined" and for "jobs . . . [to] engage everyone fairly equally" (6), conditions that the director must ensure are met. Lunsford further stresses the importance of "careful and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the collaboration or group process, again on the part of all involved" (6).

I can imagine this center without computers until we get to this last stipulation. For continuous and reflective monitoring to occur, for adequate accumulation of data on tutors' attitudes, interpersonal relationships, and opinions, nothing is more suitable as a supplement to face-to-face meetings than electronic mail and real-time conferencing. Real-time conferences provide a written transcript of interactions and make possible a different kind of interaction, in which the removal of oral and visual cues associated with gender and rank tends to equalize status. They also give the floor to everyone, and this can be quite liberating for the less vocal among us. Electronic mail has even greater advantages in this respect because it allows anyone to sit down at any time and make comments or share information, a significant advantage in a center where schedules may prevent frequent face-to-face meetings. Another time-related advantage is that events or ideas can be recorded almost as they happen, while they are fresh in the mind of the reporter. Electronic mail also leaves a valuable written record not only of who said what as the semester progresses but also of who read what. Both real-time conferences and electronic mail provide an ideal forum for tutoring training. Besides allowing for ongoing discussion of readings, they provide an opportunity to share ideas, troubles, and suggestions. They also provide another avenue to work out social relations. Finally, text sharing makes it easy for electronic tutoring logs and other writing to be shared and discussed, perhaps even as the topic of a real-time conference. With so much writing going on, and always to an immediate and concerned audience, tutors will find their rhetorical skills sharpening.

But this image does not yet change traditional one-to-one tutoring, and thus does not fully embrace collaboration. To achieve that end, we need to get clients working together. In my imagined center, there is still some one-on-one tutoring, either face-to-face or through electronic mail, as the client prefers. In these sessions, tutors work to shift authority onto clients, in the spirit of collaboration. I believe this is the sort of colaboration we currently see occurring in many writing centers (Crisp et al). But in this scenario, there will always be the tendency noted by Trimbur for tutors to be seen and to see themselves as

representatives of institutional authority, and this is especially true when they are graduate students.

So my imaginary center also sets up writing groups. Sometimes these groups grow out of classes. Members may be working together on a specific project and using the center's computers for conferencing or as a way to view each other's work. Perhaps students in a history class are working together to prepare an oral report. Or students in an eduation class are writing individual papers on the same topic and want to share ideas. In this capacity the writing center can serve classes from across the curriculum as a meeting place and a symposium. Other groups are tied to writing classes. Group members--who may come from the same or different classes--work with a team of tutors for a specified time on agreed upon pieces of writing. They meet face-to-face at least one hour a week, but they also meet frequently throughout the week in a "virtual" writing center through electronic mail. Various tutors participate in the group's electronic discourse as writers. Their presence is meant to prevent members from coming to rely on any one tutor as an ultimate authority. Furthermore, tutors interact with each other as well as with group members. Thus, the conflicts that all writers contend with occur--disagreements about style or interpretations about an assignment, for example--and tutors model how they negotiate these differences. Equally important, group members witness tutors nurture and question one another and help one another recognize and solve writing problems.

Using the network's text-sharing capability and the electronic mail system, group members read and comment upon each other's work throughout the week. Since their primary mode of communication is written, and their primary audience is interested peers with a similar goal, they increase their confidence as writers, and probably their fluency, as well as improve their rhetorical skills. More important, they use the electronic mail and real-time conferencing to monitor their group. Tutors are responsible for encouraging the reflective thinking required for group monitoring. They sometimes have to initiate activities to achieve this goal. For example, they may set up a real-time conference to discuss group

dynamics. Then in a later meeting, they use the transcript from this conference to urge re-examination of conclusions about the group.

We may learn from the qualitative research occurring in centers like this a great deal about the role of collaboration in learning and in writing, and we will certainly learn much about our specific sites. Our tutors will become more reflective, aware teachers as well as better writers, and our clients will no doubt follow the progression from dependence to interdependence to independence discovered by Marie Nelson in the writing groups she established (91). Since the staff of a writing center is constantly shifting, tutors must realize that their logs, reports, and conference transcripts are tools for future writing center researchers. Their work will be read and elaborated upon by their successors. The director, as the primary researcher, will hold it all together and ensure continuity (Nelson).

Because of the computers, a great deal of the interaction in the writing center will be written, providing transcripts that can catch far more of the interaction than ever before. At the same time, the nature of the interaction will change because of the computers, and that will be something in itself to research. Perhaps with so much basic research occurring in writing centers, they will gain new respect. Such a center cannot be run on a shoe string, of course. The director must be cognizant of research methods in composition and be provided with quality tutors, an adequate budget, as well as the software and hardware that can get the job done. Computers will have to be fairly widely accessible and software easy to learn so that clients can concentrate on writing. Clients will have to be willing to make a committment to improving their writing, not just to improving one paper, and tutors will have to work hard. As I said, this is an imaginary writing center.

However, this summer I am going to attempt to implement much of what I have discussed here. I teach a graduate seminar on writing center theory, administration, and pedagogy. Our primary objective for this summer will be to redesign our center so that it truly reflects collaboration and makes use of computer communications and text-sharing software. I will give my students this paper as a blueprint. But I fully expect that, in the

spirit of collaboration, I will have to negotiate my goals to accommodate theirs. It should be an interesting summer.

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